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AMERICAN LITERATURE AND THE MODERN MAGAZINE IN THE HIGH-SCHOOL COURSE¹

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There are at least three good reasons why the study of American literature should be a part of every high-school English course.

1. *Patriotism* demands the study of the native literature. The American boy should be aware of the achievements of his countrymen in letters as well as in war, in government, in industry; and an acquaintance with the writings of American authors will stimulate race pride in a new direction.

2. *The independent reading* of the pupil makes a study of American literature almost imperative. For the high-school student's interest is emphatically in the present-day author and his reading is chiefly from contemporary productions—mostly American, which he gets through the magazines. Hence he needs direction and guidance in this field as much as anywhere.

3. *General culture* will not allow neglect of American literature in the high school. Fragments from Whittier, Longfellow, Lowell, Hawthorne, Irving, Holmes, and perhaps Cooper are in the possession of the pupil when he enters the high school; he may get something more in a desultory fashion of Irving, of Hawthorne, of American poets during his course there; it is very doubtful if many ever get anything more in college. The college graduate's lamentable ignorance of the literature of his own people, as shown in teachers' examinations, would seem to uphold this last statement. The high school, therefore, is the place to give the pupil a definite, well-ordered course in American literature. There the knowledge which the pupil brings with him should be systematized and brought into relation with the rest of the product of American literature.

¹A paper read before the National Council of Teachers of English at Philadelphia, March 1, 1913.

THE COURSE

The plan which I suggest is now in operation in our Washington high schools. It was introduced there last September as a one-semester course in the second year, and has proved eminently successful; indeed the librarians of our five high schools report that never before has so much interest in books and reading been evidenced by the pupils. The testimony of the pupils themselves is interesting. At the end of the semester several teachers asked the students to write frankly what they thought of the work. I quote a few extracts.

"In studying American literature I gained chiefly a fondness for reading, and a respect for good literature. Many stories were read in class up to an interesting point and just for my own pleasure I finished most of them. Now I read many good books."

"I am sorry we could not have devoted a year to this work instead of one semester, for it was very instructive as well as interesting, and was a delightful study."

"I have derived many benefits from this semester's work. First of all, I will admit that I have never been a great reader; but since I came into the fourth semester, I have changed. . . . At times I have sat down and told my sister who the different authors were. She became so interested that about twice a week we have a literary meeting and discuss the different authors and their works. We now have about six who meet with us every week."

"The work in American literature which we have just finished has helped me in several ways. It has taught me how to look up references in the library and has also helped me to talk on a topic without becoming puzzled. I have learned how American literature became distinctly American; and the changes that have been made in the different ages."

"It is, in fact, so very interesting that the home-work assignments do not seem like work although they do require careful preparation."

The teachers and pupils use as a guide a syllabus on American literature. Every pupil keeps a notebook in which he records his reading from day to day.

The purpose of the course is to give a fair view of what has been done and is still being done in the domain of American letters, and to stimulate, through illustrative readings, further study and appreciation of American authors. The treatment is chronological, representative writers of each period being studied through suggested illustrations from their works. The main facts in the lives

of the writers are given; the historical background is pictured; the relation between the life of the times and the literature resulting is noted. The character of such work is extensive rather than intensive. The pupils must, from the nature of the case, make free use of the library. The mere handling of many books is valuable training. A splendid opportunity is also offered for the preparation of special topics. And such a course gives frequent chance for oral reading, which is, indeed, the most effective means of inducing appreciation of the author under consideration. Present-day writers are stressed because of the pupil's interest in the living author and also because he should be led to see that literature is still in the making. And just here is a chance to correlate the work in American literature with a study of the modern magazine.

I have suggested the following outline for magazine work.

The course should include, as a preliminary, a statement of the reasons for its introduction; a study of the origin and development of periodical literature in both England and America; of the relation of periodical literature to the life of the times; and its relation to general literature. This should be followed by a study of the American magazine of today, including classification into types, as the literary, the scientific, the current topic, the technical; a study of the make-up of magazines, contents, and advertisements; of the character of articles; of the names of contributors and editors. Then the classes should resolve themselves into chapters of the school Magazine Club, eligibility to membership in which is determined by subscription for and study of some magazine throughout the semester. At least one period every two weeks should be devoted by every class to discussion of the current numbers of the various magazines and reports on articles and stories contained therein. Exchange of magazines by the various sections may be made and in this way the student will be given the opportunity to see numbers of many current magazines and will soon learn how and what to read of present-day periodical literature.

Such a study can be made a profitable adjunct to the course in American literature. Conditions in the literary life of America certainly justify it, for, as Professor Barrett Wendell says, "the

illustrated monthly magazines which circulate by hundreds of thousands, and go from one end of the country to the other, provide the ordinary American citizen of today with his nearest approach to literature." The modern magazine does, indeed, dominate the literary life of the average American today. He has time for a casual glance at the daily news and the morning editorial at his breakfast or on his way to business. Ten or fifteen minutes can be spared now and then in the evening or on Sunday or a holiday for a short story or a striking article in some monthly or weekly. But he has neither time nor inclination for much continuous reading of longer tales or elaborated treatises. Besides, the co-operation of the economic idea of division of labor with the educational ideal of specialization has made it possible for the magazine to furnish an intellectual diet suited to all tastes. Moreover our greatest writers of short stories and poems are those whose work has appeared or is still appearing in our magazines. Indeed the history of the American magazine is the history of American literature. Periodical literature preceded or rather produced an American literature, for it was the magazine that created the audience for the author. As Henry Mills Alden, for forty years editor of *Harper's Magazine*, says: "The catholicity of magazines and their hospitality to young writers have done more than all other influences to build up our literature." Many of the masterpieces of American literature first found a reading public through the magazine. Bryant's "Thanatopsis" and "To a Water Fowl" appeared in the *North American Review*; Halleck's "Marco Bozzaris" and Bryant's "Death of the Flowers" were published in the *New York Review*; Poe's "Raven" was first published in the *New York Mirror*; Longfellow's "Psalm of Life" came out in the *Knickerbocker Magazine*; Holmes's first two instalments of "The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table" were published in the *New England Magazine*, the later ones in the *Atlantic Monthly*; Whitman's first literary success, "Death in a School Room," came out in the *Democratic Review*; Lowell's first series of *Biglow Papers* was published in the *Boston Courier*; Edward Everett Hale's "The Man without a Country" in the *Atlantic Monthly*; and Howells' "Venetian Life" in the *Boston Advertiser*; and these are but a few instances.

The magazine adapts itself to the rush and hurry of American life; it fits in with our scheme of things. The magazine—which may be picked up and thrown down at will—has forced to the shelf the book which requires leisure and quiet concentration, especially the book that has stood the test of ages. We still have our libraries fitted out with the five-foot shelf, but the books too often remain on the shelf, while our study tables are strewn with magazines of all sorts and colors. The magazine is today most emphatically playing a part in the history of American literature which threatens to become the leading rôle. It has truly served a noble purpose in the history of American letters. Through its efforts literature has been democratized; the reading public has been enormously increased. The development of literature extensively through the impulse given it by the magazine is beyond measure. But has literature lost or is it losing intensively because of its widened scope? Does our great and growing dependence on periodical literature signify danger ahead? Must our literature, in order to arouse interest, present a constantly changing moving-picture show? Shall we lose our power to appreciate and enjoy sustained efforts through over-indulgence in the short story and brief magazine article? Are we, indeed, already missing something of sweetness and light in our literature because of constant catering to the prevailing magazine taste of the reading public? Today it is said, “we lack the leisure to grow wise,” but surely these questions must give us pause, must furnish food for thought, must induce us to sound a note of warning to the coming generation. Are we not, therefore, justified in treating the magazine seriously in our high-school English course? Can we not, perhaps, thus help the pupil to resist the lure of the by-paths and hold to the broad highway of literature?